



STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Differentiated Instruction Allows Students to Succeed

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One of the hardest things for a teacher to do is to treat students differently. It goes against our very nature.

We are programmed to treat each child the same as we would treat any other child. No child deserves special privilege, nor does any child deserve less attention -- regardless of race, gender or academic ability.

It grates on our nerves when that know-it-all student who always sits in the front row always demands time to show off. It frustrates us to no end when the student in the back of the class makes rude noises and refuses to stay on task.

Making Decisions

Which students miss out most? It is the student in the middle who doesn't cause problems, who obeys, conforms, and never demands attention. We rarely give her the time of day in our race to take care of the extremes.

I had one of those students in my classroom. He was in my intermediate Spanish class and always sat in the middle. He never said a lot, and he did his work quietly. He wasn't the best in the classroom, and he wasn't the worst. I remember that he did struggle with rolling his *rs*. One day, he didn't come to class, and we got word that he had committed suicide. Not that I could have done anything to prevent this, but you always have the nagging doubt that perhaps you could have made a difference. In that moment, I vowed to never assume the quiet ones were OK.

Yet even with that, we are pressured to give the students with more needs more attention than those students who have less needs. The largest conflict about differentiated instruction boils up inside of us when we try to assign a grade to that differentiated instruction.

How can we justifiably give the students the same grade when the quality, quantity, or content of the performance is different? I have yet to read a truly compelling argument to answer that question. Most people mumble something about grades being a relative measure of student performance and designed for communication of progress only.

So, this is my attempt to make sense of this dilemma and perhaps calm a few nervous hearts in the process. In my prior post (<http://www.edutopia.org/differentiated-instruction-active-learning>) , I discussed the idea of intrinsic differentiation and the role of active learning and active teaching. Now, I want to discuss designed differentiation a bit.

Meeting Students Where They Are

Designed differentiation is the deliberate act of modifying instruction or an assignment in order to customize the effect to match the particular developmental level and skills of a student or group of students. The ideal is to provide equivalent learning activities that cater to the students' strengths but bring all of the students to the same learning objective. On one end of the spectrum is the one-size-fits-all learning activity, while on the other end is the completely individualized learning plan for each student. Although I believe it is time for the latter, realism demands that teachers deal with something that hovers around the middle of the continuum.

The best teachers throughout time have always found ways to reach individual students. Teachers today are no different. We have all sorts of designed differentiation strategies that help teachers offer variety and choice to students of different skills and needs. We can

- vary the length or quantity of the assignment.
- extend or curtail the duration of the assignment.
- change the language of the assignment.
- scaffold the learning activity from hard to medium to easy.
- compact the activity and teach only what they don't know.
- give them learning activities that let them perform the same learning objective with multiple mediums like summarizing a story they have read through narrative, drama, song, poetry, art, or design.

Allow for Do-Overs

There is also a strong movement of simply allowing students to work at their own pace through computer-aided instruction, or SRA (http://literacylauncher.com/pub/ls_our_curriculum.html) -type curriculum. There is one more type of designed differentiation method I believe is underutilized -- the rough draft.

When a student is given a learning assignment to turn in, is it really a learning assignment if they have only one chance at meeting the mastery-level standard? Clearly identified standards of performance are necessary to make this work, but when a student submits a substandard piece of work, rather than assign a grade immediately, we can provide personalized, individual feedback to that student, which includes providing suggestions for improvement and giving it back to the student for revision.

Is there a limit to the number of times this can be done to help a student overcome a particular learning obstacle? Some students might be able to do it right the first time, while others need several revisions. This strategy is the ultimate in designed differentiation.

Typically, we see this kind of opportunity only in English and social studies classes. Why not math and science? After all, if the student eventually gets the concept, isn't that what counts? The thing I like about this approach is that no student is left out -- not even the quiet, no-problem kids.

What are your successes with designed differentiation? What are your challenges? Please share your thoughts.

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